

# SARS

**What is SARS?** Severe acute respiratory syndrome is a new, transmissible, serious illness characterized by fever and muscle pain, headache, sore throat, fatigue, and dry cough. In some patients, SARS progresses to fatal form of pneumonia. The cause is a newly recognized *coronavirus*, a family of viruses responsible for the common cold. SARS was first reported in China in November 2002, and has spread around the world. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have developed a working case definition that helps health care workers decide when an illness might be SARS:

- Respiratory illness of unknown cause
- Began after February 1, 2003
- Measured temperature  $\geq 100.4^{\circ}\text{F}$  ( $>38^{\circ}\text{C}$ )

**AND**

- One or more of the following symptoms:
  - Cough
  - Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
  - A chest x ray that shows pneumonia

**AND**

- Travel within 10 days of onset of symptoms to places where people have been infected with SARS. *Travel includes transit thru an airport in an area of transmission.*

**OR**

- Having cared for, lived with, or having direct contact with respiratory secretions and/or body fluids of a patient thought to have SARS
- Newly developed laboratory tests may help diagnose SARS

**Transmission of SARS** In the US, SARS has occurred in people who have traveled to the places where SARS has spread, or in health care workers or family members who have been in close contact with SARS patients. SARS is spread when infected patients spray tiny droplets containing infectious material as they cough, sneeze, or speak. It is possible that it is spread when people touch surfaces that become contaminated when SARS patients cough or sneeze on them. The virus that causes SARS may be able to survive on surfaces for several hours.

**I think I have been exposed to SARS. What do I do?**

It takes from about 2 to 10 days to develop SARS after exposure. If you feel you have been exposed, talk with your health care provider, or your hospital infection control or public health professional. A public health clinician may visit you and advise you during this time. For 10 days, watch yourself closely for fever, cough, and shortness of breath. Take your temperature if you feel ill. Should you have symptoms, contact your health care provider *before* going to his or her office, clinic, or hospital. Your health care provider will tell you what to do. This may include staying at home, covering your mouth and nose with tissues when coughing or sneezing, washing your hands frequently, and wearing a surgical mask when in contact with others. If you are told to go to a doctor's office, clinic, or hospital, the staff will also take special measures to protect themselves and others from you while they decide if you have SARS.

## Information for VA Employees, Patients, and Visitors

**I am taking care of someone with SARS. How do I protect myself and keep others from getting it?**

All persons in contact with SARS patients should

- Wash their hands thoroughly and frequently, and especially after contact with body fluids like respiratory secretions, urine, or feces.
- Wear a surgical mask in the presence of the SARS patient if the patient is unable to wear one.
- Not share eating or drinking utensils, towels, or bedding with the SARS patient. These may be used again after washing with soap and hot water.
- Dispose of tissues and surgical masks with regular household trash.
- Clean surfaces that SARS patients may have coughed on or soiled with body fluids using household disinfectants.
- Wear disposable gloves when touching any SARS patient's body fluids, but dispose of the gloves after each use, and wash hands thoroughly even if gloves were used.
- Follow advice of their health care provider, or hospital infection control or public health professional on allowed activities.

SARS patients should

- Not go to work, school, church, out-of-home childcare, or any other public areas until 10 days after their fever and respiratory symptoms resolve.
- Cover their mouths and noses with disposable tissues when coughing or sneezing and wear surgical masks, if able, when in contact with others. If it is difficult for the SARS patient to wear a surgical mask, then household members should wear surgical masks when around the SARS patient.

**Treatment of SARS** Presently, there is no specific treatment for SARS. Patients with SARS are treated with measures to make them comfortable (like resting, reducing fever, maintaining fluid intake) and to support body functions like adequate breathing. Some patients may be given antibiotics and antiviral drugs in case the illness they are experiencing is another type of bacterial or viral infection and is not SARS.

**Further Information** CDC maintains more detailed and current information and recommendations at

[www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/). The VA SARS Web sites are [www.publichealth.va.gov/sars](http://www.publichealth.va.gov/sars) and [vaww.vhaco.va.gov/phshcg/SARS/](http://vaww.vhaco.va.gov/phshcg/SARS/)

The information presented here is current as of the date on this page. Updates will be posted on the VA SARS Web site as information changes.

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